

## THACKERAY THE SATIRIST

**T**HACKERAY is not an easy author to expound, because of a curious mixture in him of simplicity and subtlety. On the surface, nothing could be simpler than a novel by Thackeray, but when we inquire into his secret, that which has made him famous, made him loved, we are evaded and baffled. I meet people who do not like Thackeray. I find there is no arguing the case; he is the least demonstrable of the authors. If a person does not like Browning, I shall probably not be able to make him like Browning, for we cannot argue people into feeling anything; but I can at least show him why I like Browning. I find it hard to show dissenters why I like Thackeray.

Suppose a person says that Thackeray's plots are slight, his philosophy thin, his sentiment sloppy, his cynicism cheap, his motivation superficial,—what are we to answer? Well, of course, we can say that the man has a very disagreeable way of stating the matter. But suppose he asks if the charge, when made more politely, is unjust,—can we honestly answer, "Yes"? If I am then asked why, in spite of all this, I like Thackeray, I suppose I must reply, "Because he is Thackeray"—a not very convincing reason.

In literature, as in life, it sometimes happens that we have a deep and personal affection for some one out of all proportion to his talents or his virtues. Charles Lamb is a notable example. His writing is the expression of a personality which attracts and compels love. Thackeray has some of this same magnetism. One sometimes disapproves of what he says and wearies of his mannerisms, but the man himself, as expressed in his writings, is charming. And that is the

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word which above all others applies to Thackeray and his writings,—charm. It was the quality which he found in Dick Steele, and which made him love poor reckless, faulty, falling Dick. Thackeray is seldom in a happier vein than when writing of Dick, whether as a fictitious character in a novel or as the historical subject of an essay. I take a passage from that same essay, which expresses what I am trying to say about Thackeray: "If Steele is not our friend, he is nothing. He is by no means the most brilliant of wits nor the deepest of thinkers; we love him as children love their love, with an A because he is amiable." We might play the old childhood game with Thackeray and say we love him with a C because he is charming, and "if he is not our friend, he is nothing."

So far as anything so intangible can be explained, it must be explained by Thackeray's intimate and informal manner. He takes us into his confidence. He seems to be talking to us in the most personal and intimate way. He loves the personal pronoun "you," the pronoun of direct address. The literary art of a man like Thackeray is the art of raising conversation to the highest potential, and conversation means letting the thought flow where it will. There are people who never converse, but talk. They talk at us, over us, to us, never with us; they harangue, soliloquize, declaim, argue like lawyers, dissect like doctors, dogmatize like pedagogues; you assent, dissent, query, comply; you try to get away from the topic, but are jerked back like a calf on a rope; your eye pleads for mercy, but you get none; your mind wanders to pleasant pastures and still waters, but you are called to attention like a raw recruit by an angry drill-sergeant; when at last it ends, you murmur, "Thank God, that 's over!" Then you talk with the real conversationalist; your minds meet and merge as easily as currents of air; you

pass lightly from subject to subject, grave and gay, sense and nonsense, trivial and weighty,—it all mingles like many tributaries in an unimpeded stream. It is as natural as breathing, and as unforced.

So it is with Thackeray. He sits down to that perfect talk of his, and stories and characters “just grow” in the most unobtrusive, haphazard way. He is the least methodical of the great novelists. If no novel can be great without unity and coherence of plot, then Thackeray’s novels are assuredly not great. But a perfect plot does not of itself insure perfect literary art. It would be difficult to find better plot-making than the old nursery rhyme:

“The King of France went up a hill  
With twenty thousand men;  
The King of France came down that hill  
And ne’er went up again.”

There is plot structure! There is unity, rising action, climax, falling action, catastrophe. It is safe to say that few plays produced this season have been so close-woven in plot as that; yet it leaves something to be desired. Thackeray supplies the something—a personality.

Consider, for instance, the opening of “The Newcomes.” First there is a fable of crows, frogs, oxen, foxes, lambs, and wolves, related in the vernacular with a quiet smile; then a discussion of critics and authors; then half-satiric praise of the “good old days” when he was young and ate late Welsh rabbit, and drank brandy and water, and sang gleeful songs at the inn called the Cave of Harmony; then into the Cave of Harmony comes a sun-browned, lean military gentleman, leading a lad. They are Colonel Newcome and his son Clive. The story has begun, but so casually, so conversa-

tionally, that you scarcely know it has begun. You wonder if he knows how he is going to carry it on. He does n't. In this same story he kills an old lady in one chapter, and, forgetting this, he has her alive and blithely active in a subsequent chapter, and then he laughs at his own blunder. He was once asked why Becky Sharp behaved in a certain way, and he answered, "Don't ask me; Becky is too much for me." It is all negligent and perfect conversation. A critic has defined Thackeray's quality as "urbane negligence." It is a happy phrase.

The perfect conversationalist is generally a man who will say many true things and wise things and witty things, but hardly the profoundest things. Profundity and conversational ease do not go well together. Profundity belongs to some more formal method,—for instance, to George Eliot's analytical method. Thackeray was a wise man in the mel-low, worldly sense of the term. He was not a deep thinker, nor was he particularly interested in the deeper thoughts of his generation. He was the one great Victorian writer who seemed to be untouched by the prevailing national and philosophical modes of thought. The air was surcharged with big and sometimes disconcerting ideas, and nearly all the other novelists and poets and essayists were inspired or disturbed by these ideas. If all other record of the century were wiped out, the future historian could reconstruct the century in outline by reading Dickens, George Eliot, Ruskin, Tennyson, Browning, and Arnold. But from Thackeray he would learn little about the political, economic, scientific, philosophical, and religious life of the century, though he would learn much about the social life, and much about Thackeray himself.

In "The Newcomes" we read how young Clive Newcome sailed away from India and his papa to England and his

aunts; it is biographical, with this difference, that it was Clive's mother who died in India, but Thackeray's father. Mrs. Thackeray was to take for her second husband Major Carmichael Smyth, who was destined to be immortalized by his stepson as Colonel Newcome. Then Thackeray took up the tale of his boyhood in "Pendennis," wherein his own famous school, Charterhouse, becomes Greyfriars; his real home, Ottery St. Mary, becomes Clavering St. Mary; and his real university, Cambridge, becomes Oxbridge. Of course we understand that he mingles much pure fiction with his recollections of himself, but at Trinity College, Cambridge, Thackeray's career was not unlike Pen's, a liberal interpretation of his obligations to the curriculum, a more liberal expenditure of time and money in social diversion, a good deal of miscellaneous reading, some sketching, and some writing, especially for "The Snob," an undergraduate publication.

In the Sketches and Burlesques we hear of the Court of Pumpnickel, and its oddities arose from memories of his own travels in Germany after leaving Cambridge, and particularly of his residence at Weimar, where he met the aged Goethe. It was Paris rather than Weimar that was destined to be the foreign city of his love, and his object in going to Paris was the familiar one of art study. He had been a university man and a student of law like Pendennis, and now he will be a student of art like Clive Newcome. He had always loved to sketch, and after he had become sufficiently disgusted with law he decided that drawing was "the one thing he could do." Of course we know that it was the one thing he could not do in any accepted sense. Probably a worse draftsman never made famous pictures. It is not surprising that his application to illustrate Dickens's "Pickwick Papers" met with a refusal. And yet Thackeray's pictures

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are famous, and justly so. They violate most of the principles of technique, but get their effect notwithstanding, and in this way they may be regarded as a parable of his literary art.

While living in Paris, and as soon as he thought he could support a wife, he had married Miss Shawe, daughter of an Irish colonel. After four happy years Mrs. Thackeray fell ill. The malady was mental. There were two years of travel and nursing and suspense, two years more of hoping against hope, then the abandonment of all hope, and the doors of an asylum finally closed upon her. Thackeray's own words much later were, "Though my marriage was a wreck, I would do it over again; for, behold, love is the crown and completion of all earthly good."

As his home was now broken up, he sent his little girls to their grandparents in Paris until they should be old enough to do with only a man's care, and he, joining various clubs, took up the life and habits of a clubman, and his outlook on life became a clubman's. That is not said in condemnation, but neither is it said in commendation. Very excellent gentlemen are frequently habitual clubmen, but a club is not the best school for a novelist, nor the best place in which to observe life in its primitive and essential traits. The clubman is tempted to apply false standards to men, to judge them according to their clubs and the social register, not according to their manhood. He frequently lays more weight upon the accidents of life than upon its realities. He inclines to grow conventional, fastidious, a little snobbish, perhaps, and painfully punctilious about conduct which is prescribed by neither the moral law nor the civil law.

This is not intended as a portrait of Thackeray, but rather as a setting. He was a clubman who had known a home, and had known Bohemia, where conventionality is as much neg-

lected as it is overstressed in clubdom. He was a chastened and a broadened clubman. But he did get a good deal of the clubman's attitude, did view the world too often from the club windows, noted the stranger leaning on Lord Fuddlestone's arm and wondered why, perceived the unfamiliar face in the Marquis of Steyne's carriage and wondered who, observed that Mr. Deuce-ace's coat was getting shabby and smiled a little ironically.

No one has anatomized snobs more cunningly, but the "Book of Snobs" bore on its title-page the statement that it was written "by One of Themselves," and there was more than a jest in the pseudonym. Thackeray is said to have remarked that he was a snob. Certainly we who love him would not go so far as that, but it is true that he understood the breed better because of an instinctive familiarity with their point of view. Perhaps it is only natural to be more interested in a man if he has a title than if he is plain "Mr."; at any rate, with Thackeray it was extremely natural. Some one has remarked that Mr. Alexander Pope had a great deal of human nature in himself; in his attitude toward worldly place Mr. Thackeray had in himself an excess of human nature. You note with what gusto he traces the family relationships of many of his heroes, frequently with gentle mockery for satirical purposes; but he knew—none better—that his satiric shots had found a vulnerable spot in his own bosom.

Thackeray's satire is not the satire of a man who hated the thing he was talking about; had he hated it cordially, there were plenty of roads of escape. His friend Tennyson disliked society and had no trouble in keeping away from it in Surrey and the Isle of Wight. His friend Edward Fitzgerald hated it and made himself comfortable at Woodbridge, where it never came. But Thackeray did not try to

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escape. He loved Belgravia and Mayfair, however much he satirized them.

So it comes about that this great man has little to say about the things that are eternal, much to say of the things of a season. A good deal of the difficulty with which his characters have to contend is money difficulty. The heroic and tragic books in literature are not usually woven out of the money motive. Of course, Thackeray was not trying for big effects. Over and over again he protests that there is nothing heroic in his novels, least of all the "heroes"; but that is just the point I am making—that he does overlook the large things, the primal things, the fundamental things. It must be admitted, however, that he has a sort of magic in making the worldly things interesting, and that the tone of worldliness is much softened by the great heart which beat in this big man's bosom,—the real and unaffected regard which he had for simple goodness.

The tone of melancholy seems to grow out of the fact that he sees simple goodness overcrusted so often with worldliness. My only criticism is that he would have found it less overcrusted out of clubdom and out of Belgravia. Nor is this meant to say that the people living in Thackeray's world were any worse than those who lived out of it, but it is meant to say that the people outside of the fashionable set with which he was so familiar did not offend in that special way which caused him so much pain, did not sacrifice everything for worldly place, did not sell their daughters to the highest bidder, did not wear themselves out with trying to appear something other than what they were.

Because Thackeray dwelt so exclusively on the social side of men's lives and laughed so satirically at their foibles, he was called a satirist as soon as he began to be read in England. And he immediately earned the reputation of being a



cynical satirist because people insisted on contrasting him with Dickens. Dickens was also a satirist, but obviously he was no cynic. When "Vanity Fair" appeared Dickens had already become famous. "Vanity Fair" made it clear that another great novelist had entered the lists, and readers, ranging from the most intelligent, like Mrs. Carlyle, to the most shallow, fell to making comparisons.

One of the patent points of contrast lay in the fact that Dickens painted human nature in bold primary colors and high lights, while Thackeray painted it in neutral drab. Dickens passionately loved his good characters and passionately hated his mean ones. But Thackeray laughed at his own characters, and painted faults in the good ones and virtues in the bad ones, with the result that human nature in his books was reduced to a common level. There were no absolute heroes and few absolute villains, and at the end of the story the good people were but moderately rewarded and the bad were inadequately punished.

It was consoling to find in the pages of Dickens that virtue brings happiness right here in this world, but Thackeray not only left the good people imperfectly happy, he even averred over and over again that complete happiness is impossible. Did not that very novel "Vanity Fair" conclude with this discouraging sentiment: "Ah! Vanitas Vanitatum! which of us is happy in this world? which of us has his desire? or, having it, is satisfied?" And did not much of the moralizing in the book run to this same tune?

And what a state of affairs there is at the end of this all-important "Vanity Fair"! There was pious Amelia Sedley, who married George Osborne and loved him with the dumb worship of an Oriental devotee, while George was bored by her and trifled with other women, and even when he bade her good-bye before going to fight at Waterloo, came

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out of the room murmuring, "Thank heaven, that is over"; and then George got killed and poor Amelia worshiped his canonized memory, and all the time Colonel Dobbin, who had always loved her, was hovering about her, trying to make her a little happier, and Amelia was piously inhibiting the idea of happiness with poor George dead and in his grave and his sainted spirit looking down on her from above; until after many years Mrs. Rawdon Crawley tells her that she is "a fool" and that her precious dead husband was a "selfish humbug" and a "low-bred cockney dandy," and had tried to get her, Mrs. Crawley, to elope with him, and, to prove it, shows poor Amelia the very note in which George had made this amiable proposition, a note written on the very day of his death and passed to prudent Mrs. Crawley under his wife's nose. So with a clear conscience Amelia marries Dobbin (and Thackeray does not refrain from telling us that she found it rather a relief to be released from her duty to the dead man in order that she might marry the living), and as time goes by and the Dobbins have a little girl, Amelia sighs as she thinks she perceives that the devoted Dobbin is fonder of the child than he is of her,—even he, patient, long-suffering Dobbin! And the best that Thackeray can tell us is: "But he never said a word to Amelia that was not kind and gentle, or thought of a want of hers that he did not try to gratify." And that is the end of pious Amelia's story.

In the same novel is wicked Becky Sharp, whose minor adventures were much too numerous for summarization, but whose chief escapades included an elopement with that notorious rake Captain Rawdon Crawley, and a sad repentance when she found that if she had only waited a little longer she might have married Sir Pitt Crawley himself; and then a disgraceful affair with Lord Steyne, so that her hus-

band had to leave her; and then a shabby-genteel life of travel over Europe with huge, gross Joe Sedley, who frittered away his property and died so mysteriously that there had to be an investigation, but nothing was proved, though the judge said it was one of the darkest cases that had ever come before him; and Becky got the insurance money and went to live at Bath, where "a very strong party of excellent people consider her a most injured woman." Here she devotes her life "to works of piety"; "she goes to church,"—and Thackeray adds, "never without a footman," as if that were an embellishment of piety. "Her name is on all the Charity Lists. The destitute Orange-girl, the neglected Washerwoman, the distressed Muffin-man find in her a fast and generous friend. She is always having stalls at Fancy Fairs for the benefit of these hapless beings." And that is the end of wicked Becky Sharp's story.

When the tale is told, is pious Amelia much better off than wicked Becky? Neither is really happy. What advantage hath the righteous in such a scheme as this? We know how differently Dickens would have handled these lives, what delirium of happiness there would have been for Amelia, what depth below depth of disgrace and misery for Becky.

So people deduced the inference that Dickens thoroughly believed in human goodness and its triumph on earth, and therefore he was an optimist; while Thackeray did not thoroughly believe in human goodness and its earthly reward, and therefore he was a cynic. It was this contrast which at the outset went far toward giving Thackeray a bad name. To-day the most careless reader of Thackeray, with the contrast no longer so sharply in mind, penetrates the veneer of cynicism and exposes Thackeray's tender humanity, which lies just below the surface. We compare him with Dean Swift, the real cynic and satirist, the bitter

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despiser of mankind, and realize that, by this standard of misanthropy, Thackeray was a very superficial cynic. Furthermore, we realize that underneath the tone of mockery there is a sentimentalism as incorrigible as Dickens's own. Thackeray loved humanity and the simple virtues as much as Dickens. But he was more of a realist than Dickens. He could not so cheerfully and confidently divide mankind into good and bad. He was too much impressed with the way in which qualities blend in actual life.

The real point of it all lies in this, that Thackeray loved humanity so deeply that he was grieved to see how much of its frailty and transgressions are chargeable to society and its standards and exactions. Thackeray instinctively thought of men and women in their social relationships, and he found that these relationships, while necessary, entail much misery. It was not so much with basic human nature that Thackeray worked, as with human nature modified by society. Being a very truthful person, he was unwilling to fling over life a drapery of illusion with which life had never provided itself. He was not a philosopher in the metaphysical sense in which George Eliot and Browning were philosophers, was not trying to look behind appearances at ultimate realities. It was his habit of mind to think most about life as it actually exists here on earth, and for the comparative unsatisfactoriness of life he held society largely responsible. This, I take it, is the underlying philosophy of the characteristic satiric tone in the novels of Thackeray.

This satire, as he drew it, was marked by two constant aims: his desire to depict the average man and his desire to show the truth. He was capable of large enthusiasms for superior men, and was as much a hero-worshiper of Nelson or the Duke of Wellington as most Englishmen of his time. But superior men are rare, and, because of their greater

number, Thackeray felt that the average men are more important in literature. Besides, he disliked "heroes" in fiction because they were associated with the highly romantic style of novel, for which he never cared. He, who knew so much of eighteenth-century literature, was unaffected by the far-reaching romantic movement of that century. He loved the writers who depicted daily life and daily manners. His first great novel, "Vanity Fair," had for its subtitle, "A Novel without a Hero," and he closed "Pendennis" with the statement that Arthur Pendennis "does not claim to be a hero, but only a man and a brother."

In portraying the average man, Thackeray aimed to be as truthful as possible. Love of truth was one of his cardinal traits,—not truth in the philosophic sense of the ultimate, but simply fidelity to the actualities of the world. He preferred showing things as they are to idealizing them into something better than they are. He had the plain Englishman's respect for the facts of things, and a feeling—also very English—that to the truth he owed loyalty. This is his attitude in all his works, but is perhaps most explicit in "Pendennis." In the preface to this novel he says: "I ask you to believe that this person writing strives to tell the truth. If there is not that, there is nothing."

That is the Thackeray attitude. It is the attitude which says in effect: Take care of the truth, and morality will take care of itself. Is it wrong to let a man gamble and drink too much and play fast and loose with social standards, and yet permit him to remain lovable—like my Lord Castlewood? Is it wrong to let a man gamble and drink too much and be rough and brutal, and yet so thoroughly manly that we must admire him—like Captain Rawdon Crawley? Does not morality demand that these people be made hateful and contemptible in books? Thackeray's answer would be, Are

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they always hateful and contemptible in actual life? and is it not immoral to tell lies? I heard a preacher say that loose-living men are always cowards, and then I remembered the soldiers who followed the Duke of Marlborough into battle, and, frankly, I think the preacher was less moral than Mr. Thackeray.

The worst of it is that boys so quickly find the falsehood in these forced morals. Nobody insisted more on the beauty of virtue than Thackeray, but he could not feel that he enhanced the beauty of virtue by telling lies about it. And the plain truth is that sometimes very bad men have some very endearing qualities. The wickedest boy in the town that I grew up in was the bravest, and the way to make the other boys good was not to deny that obvious and much-admired courage. So there are some truths which sound cynical when merely stated, and these happened to be among the truths which impressed Thackeray.

There is no danger in this view, if we will understand our own thoughts and discriminations. Thackeray did not confuse good and evil. He understood—none clearer—that good is good and evil is evil, and that the two can never shift identities this side eternity. What he could not see nor say was, that some men monopolize all the good, and other men monopolize all the evil. He had the absolute hatred of sin which every man, sobered and saddened by experience and observation, must have. But because he hated sin he did not therefore hate sinners; that would seem to him like universal hatred, for “there is none righteous; no, not one,” says the Scripture explicitly, says Thackeray in effect. To hate sin and love the sinner is simple Christianity—that is all.

Thackeray added to his apparent cynicism by taking a Back-stairs View of life, by lingering over those intimate and minor personal details which the heroic romancers sel-

dom observed. Love and great deeds! Those were the themes of the old romancers. But it interested Thackeray to know what the hero was doing in the interim of the great deeds, and when love had ceased to be a fever and become the sweet and quiet habit of a life. How much of even a great career is made up of romantic events? If we could state the ratio in mathematics, it would be startlingly small, and in the life of the average man appallingly small. More than one-third of life is spent in sleep, our heads, as Carlyle says, "full of the foolishhest dreams," and an eighth of the remainder is occupied with giving a human imitation of a dumbwaiter, passing food to that insatiable fellow that dwells under the waistband. From fifteen to twenty years, at the beginning of life, are spent in getting ready to do something; five, ten, or fifteen years, at the close, are spent in resting after doing it. The nominal period of great deeds is short, and the actual period much shorter.

Thackeray knew that the knight himself spent only a moiety of his time in knightliness, in rescuing fair and distressed maidens from embarrassing circumstances. Much of the while, the knight was foraging for his horse and himself, dickering with the blacksmith, quarreling with the armorer, disputing the price of a night's lodging, digesting his food and drink. It was doubtless because the romancers overlooked these homely realities that Thackeray did not care for romances,—one regrets to say not even for so fine a romance as "The Bride of Lammermoor." He said, "I have never cared for the Master of Ravenswood or fetched his hat out of the water since he dropped it there when I last met him (*circa* 1825)."

It was every-day life, with its every-day incidents, only occasionally varied by something tense, terrible, or beautiful, which absorbed Thackeray. By way of parenthesis let me

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observe that this modification, "occasionally varied," is important. Thackeray, like Balzac, like all great realists, understood that life, though usually commonplace, is occasionally dramatic. The longer stretches of life are on a low and level plain, but somewhere in the shadows, for nearly everybody, there is lurking the "moment." These tense moments are as essential to the truth of life as are the longer periods of its ordinary courses. This point is sometimes missed by realists a little less great than the greatest,—even by admirable Mr. Arnold Bennett himself; they are so anxious to tell only the truth that they are afraid of the whole truth. Thackeray and Balzac did not shun the dramatic moments, for they knew that these are a part of the truth. But in the nature of the case, the realist must give up more of his novel to the ordinary than to the exception, and the ordinary which most appealed to Thackeray was the intimate personal life of the family.

And so I call his novels a Back-stairs View of life. You don't know the family from the front-stairs view, the reception-room and company manners. The family's history lies back of the drawing-room. This does not necessarily mean that there are skeletons in the closet—though there generally is a skeleton in the closet of a family of which Thackeray writes the fictitious annals; what it chiefly means is that the intimate and personal life of the individual or the family is not the life that is paraded on the avenue. And it means that Thackeray is not content to show you his creatures on parade. He takes you into his confidence and tells you all about their private affairs. That is why we seem to know the Thackeray folk better than we know the people of, say, Scott's novels.

The satire of Thackeray, then, is just that darker shading to the truth of life as he saw it. With calm and steadfast



eyes and with the most tolerant of spirits, he looked the world in the face, saw littleness mingled with all greatness, goodness mixed with all meanness, good fortune and ill fortune chemically combined, and dispassionately recorded what he saw. And this satire of his, because it was written without reformatory purpose, because it was written without malice, because, above all, it was written by a great-hearted gentleman, is so broad, so mellow, so genial, so urbane, that it renders trivial most subsequent English social satire, with its smart talk, its forced epigram, and its shrill propaganda.

Not less than his love of truth was his charity. It was as broad as humanity. It was to him an absolutely necessary virtue in a world as complicated as this. There is no other working system among the sons of men than charity toward all. This is the obverse side of the Thackeray satire. It is impossible to see Thackeray whole if we see him only as a satirist. Indeed, one is not sure that the philosophy of Thackeray can be stated at all in terms of satire. One is rather inclined to think that the philosophy of Thackeray can be stated only in terms of charity. So simple is that philosophy that it may almost be summed up in the petition, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors."

Probably America can never have so comprehensive a satirist as Thackeray. America is too big and varied for any one city to concentrate its qualities as London concentrated English society in the days of Thackeray. A satiric picture of New York would not be a satiric picture of San Francisco. It is more likely that each great social center will produce its own satirist. If he is to be as great as Thackeray, he must be not only as keen and caustic; he must also be as large of nature, as broad in sympathies, as able to laugh with poor old humanity as to laugh at it.